ODD WISDOM
I Corinthians 1:18-31
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We are in a period of time when the church is rightly charged with being foolish. The news contains reports of court battles over the Ten Commandments in schools and the teaching of creation as a seven-day process. Our own Presbytery has been engaged during the last year and a half over the legal question of whether the congregation or the denomination own the physical church building. The United Presbyterian Church has for one of its major emphases this year the goal of peacemaking while our country plans to reduce funds from other areas so that our percentage spent on the defense and initiation of war will approach that of other countries.

Most of us most of the time are content to let the church ramble on as it is because Christianity is not in touch with reality. This is not a new charge. In the New Testament lesson, Paul tries to defend the foolishness of God no more than forty years after Jesus' death. Tertullian, one of the early great theologians summed up the Christian faith by saying, "The son of God died: it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And he was buried, and rose again: the fact is certain, because it is impossible."

If you are at all like me this whole business sounds a little foolish. I feel as if I'm listening to a carnival midway barker trying to lure me inside and I'm skeptical. If this faith is foolishness, then I don't want any part of it. No faith, no philosophy, no way of life which does not take reality seriously is any help. Critics often acknowledge that God's wisdom is foolish - but foolish because it has essentially nothing to do with the way the world operates. There is a famous quip urging belief in God - it won't hurt you while you're alive and may help after you die.

This aims straight at the unpracticality and unreality of Christianity. There is certainly some truth here, but a belief that reality is what we see of the world takes neither the world nor ourselves seriously. It is a confusion over what is reality and what is apparent and leads to a cynicism and agnosticism which is intellectually lazy. I am thankful that the continued emphasis of our reformed heritage is that faith is informed by reason. Our faith won't let us be content with narrowness or slick packaging or easy answers but demands that we deal directly with reality.

Reality is the way in which we organize and comprehend the world we see. The trouble is that the world is not as simple as we make it out to be. High School physics students learn that most of the volume of an atom is empty space and that atoms are in constant motion. Probability is the only thing that determines where the sparce clumps of mass are located. This presents us with a dilemma. I tap this pulpit. It looks solid and it feels solid - but at the same time it's not solid - it's full of holes - and I could shoot an atom through that pulpit and there is a probability that it would go straight through the pulpit of atoms in motion. It is solid but it's not solid! It looks as if it is not moving, but it's moving! What you see is NOT what you get.

An incredible exhibit of the art works of Sidney Goodman is concluding at the Columbus Museum of Art. At first glance these paintings and drawings are ordinary statements about everyday events and peoples. But there is something not quite right: the light is too bright; the contrasts are too sharp; there are strange shapes in the busy city sidewalk which look uncomfortably like parts of a body; and is the man stretched out on the sunporch with a newspaper over his head a sunbather asleep or a corpse? The introduction to the exhibit catalogue puts it this way, "What is perhaps most disturbing and compelling is that everything seems reasonable and is not...The events that seem to be happening...are neither real nor unreal in ordinary terms. Neither is gravity suspended, nor logic. Rather we are persuaded to acknowledge another reality altogether." (George Barber in Sidney Goodman, Paintings, Drawings and Graphics, 1959-1979). Not only is the world different

from what it appears but we don't see everything that is there. Everything our senses encounter is filtered through our brain's perception of the way things are. Things need to make sense for us. Reality is the way we have of organizing how we experience the world.

If we put on glasses whose lens were designed so that everything we saw through them would be upside down, and if we left those glasses on constantly, within a week or so our brains would compensate for the lens and we would start to see all the images right side up. We work hard to keep the way we organize our world, our reality, in a way we can understand. Not to do that would be foolish.

We see what we want to see. We don't hear what we don't want to hear. If we don't want to, then we really won't see how our parent or our spouse is acting in a different way. We won't really hear what people tell us about our daughter or son. We'll dismiss a coincidence away. We'll explain and rationalize all sorts of behavior because otherwise it wouldn't fit into the way we have constructed reality. In order not to face what is real we will run away - cut off the TV - not read anything that will challenge our beliefs - stay too busy to think about it, sit on it, sleep on it, drink it away, cry it away, pop a few pills, plop a few coins in the beggars' cans - plop, plop, fizz, fizz. Oh, what a relief it is! We fight desperately to hold things together! Don't acknolwedge what life is really like - that way we won't have to face it.

The Pharisees throughout history have asked Jesus, "Show us the signs. Show us God's reality." It wasn't clear, we didn't know. The NEW YORK TIMES of February 1st reviewed a book showing clear evidence that the Western world knew of the Nazi slaughter of the Jews in World War II long before the war was over. The same day's paper reported the recent wave of national indignation over the treatment of the hostages held by Iran although reports of their treatment had filtered out during their captivity. We don't want to know so we don't see the signs. So what is reality?

Perhaps the foolishness of God is what's real and the wisdom of humans is what's apparent. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, told a parable about "a jeweler who had developed his knowledge of precious stones to such an extent that his whole life was in the distinction between genuine and false. Suppose he saw a child gleefully playing with a variety of stones, genuine and false all mixed together having equal delight in both - he would shudder inwardly at seeing the absolute distinction resolved - but in case he saw the child's happiness and the delight in the game, he would perhaps humble himself under it and be absorbed in this 'shuddering' sight." (Parables of Kierkegaard, T. Oden ed.).

The power and wisdom of God which is Christ frees us from the shuddering sight of who we think we are and who we think others might be and lets us face ourselves and them. God's Good News is that Christ is present in the discontinuities and tragedies of life and embraces them. So then can we.

God's odd wisdom is often revealed in what the world calls foolish, the weak, the contemptible, the poor and the ugly.This odd wisdom is dramatically shown in the play The Elephant Man. Based upon actual events, it is the powerful story of John Merrick, so hideously deformed that he is exhibited in Victorian England as "the Elephant Man". People are so revolted by his looks that he is forbidden to be shown even in carnivals. He is saved by a doctor and kept in the London hospital. There people come to know him - as does the audience - and, they see through the horrible disfigurement to a sensitive, caring human who tries desperately to be like everyone else. The way they look at reality is changed by their interaction with him. He becomes a friend of high society. In a scene entitled "Who Does He Remind You Of?" each of his friends and acquaintances acknowledges some part of themselves that is reflected in the Elephant Man and they begin to feel as if the Elephant Man's story is also their story. God uses the weak to shame the strong. He uses the ugly to shame the beautiful.

How odd of God...To choose the Jews. Yet from this two-bit nation comes a man who was known to his contemporaries as a drunkard and a crazy but who had an odd air of wisdom and authority about him.This Jesus didn't tell the blind to walk or the rich to eat but instead met people where they were and saw and touched people at the depths of their individuality and ugliness and disease and showed them what real life was about. And this real life was so different from the pasted together mass-media molded picture of reality they had constructed that they could only describe their new life in just those terms. It's like they were seeing the world again for the first time - and maybe they were. We have died to the old life, we are born to the new life. We have been born anew, born again, born from above.

The head of John Merrick, the Elephant Man, was so large and heavy that he could not sleep lying down. He had to sleep sitting up, knees drawn up and his arms clasped around his knees, while his head rested on the points of his bent knees. In the words of his doctor friend, Fredrick Treves, "He often said to me that he wished he could lie down to sleep 'like other people'. I think on his last night (in April, 1890) he must, with some determination, have made the experiment. The pillow was soft, and the head, when placed on it, must have fallen backwards and caused a dislocation of the neck. Thus it came about that his death was due to the desire that had dominated his life - the pathetic but hopeless desire to be 'like other people'." ("The True Story of the Elephant Man", an appendix to M. Howard and P. Ford, The True Story of the Elephant Man). The ugliness of ourselves and of life is embraced by the God who has made the wisdom of the world look foolish.

What deepest reality is like, of what finally is true, of what ultimately matters and gives meaning to life, of what allows us to organize all reality - is the most real thing in the world - Jesus Christ. "What God has done in Christ crucified is in direct contradiction to human perceptions of wisdom and power, yet it achieved what human wisdom and power failed to achieve. It conveys the truth about God and humans and it delivers us from bondage." (C.K.Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians).

Acknowledging what is real offers us the possibility of seeing life in a brand new way. Of living life to the fullest - firmly in reality.

God's odd wisdom.
Happy are the poor in spirit.
To find a life you must lose it.
The foolishness of God is wiser than humans.
Become like little children.
The weakness of God is stronger than humans.
The last will be first.
The greatest among you will be a servant.
He will be weak so that we might be strong.
He will die that we might live.

If you must boast, boast of the Lord - and the odd wisdom of his wonderful love.

Amen.